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Curriculum as a Site of Social Responsibility:

The Politics of Canon-Making in Indian Universities

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The university curriculum of literary departments is not a static archive but a dynamic terrain which not only reflects pedagogic aspirations but also works as a site of societal negotiations. In India, this terrain is particularly complex, as the disciplines of literatures were first institutionalized with colonial motivations, resulting in the imposition of an anglocentric canon. This paper

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argues that the evolution of the literary syllabus in post-independence Indian universities represents a sustained exercise of Academic Social Responsibility (ASR). It looks at the conscious and often contentious process of curricular reform as a primary mechanism through which literary academia has sought to address historical inequities and fulfill its ethical commitment to a more just and representative society.Tracing curricular shifts from the 1950s to the present, the paper examines the post-independence nationalistic project of incorporating Indian writers, the subsequent push to include regional Bhasha literatures, and the critical interventions made by feminist and Dalit movements. Through a focused case study on the inclusion of marginalised and Dalit literature, it analyzes how the journey of these texts from the margins to the mainstream syllabus constitutes a direct response to calls for social justice, fundamentally challenging the aesthetic and political foundations of the traditional canon.The paper will look at the cases of Visva Bharati and Jadavpur University, two of the

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primary sites of higher education that consciously moved away from the British system of education to understand their interventions in canon formation. The paper will specifically investigate how the new curricula of the literature departments of these universities helped in the formation of newer discourses in literary studies that envisaged social equity in their own terms.

> We must find some meeting-ground, where there can be no question of conflicting interests. One of such places is the University, where we can work together in a common pursuit of truth, share together our common heritage, and realise that artists in all parts of the world have created forms of beauty, scientists discovered secrets of the universe, philosophers solved the problems of existence, saints made the truth of the spiritual world organic in their own lives, not merely for some particular race to which they belonged but for all mankind. (Tagore 171)

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Institutionalised education has always had definite purposes, functions, and power to influence. Education, when designed to be imparted, almost inevitably goes beyond the primary object of mere knowledge acquisition. Responsibility, in the context of curriculum, is not an extraneous element but is built into the very procedures by which texts are selected, valued, and transmitted within institutions. The paper begins from the premise that the literary syllabus is a historically produced structure of obligation—to whom and to what does a department of literature understand itself as answerable when it decides what counts as “literature” worth teaching in a given time and place? In colonial India, much like the universities built on the Oxford model, Calcutta University’s departments of English and, later, Bengali, operated within an apparatus designed to produce a colonially useful elite through the study of a narrowly defined, Anglocentric canon. In contrast, Visva-Bharati and the National Council of Education in Bengal, which later transformed into

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Jadavpur University, emerged as conscious experiments in reconfiguring that structure of obligation, attempting to realign their concerns, and in turn, literary study with other constituencies, like regional language communities, anti-colonial nationalism, and eventually movements arising from historical forms of oppression. Reading these shifts through an idea of "responsibility" foregrounds curriculum not as a passive reflection of social change but as one of the means by which institutions attempt to or inadvertently intervene in the social order.

The Responsible Canon: Curriculum, Social Justice, and the Politics of Literary Studies in India

Within debates on University Social Responsibility (USR), responsibility is increasingly conceptualised not only as outreach activity but as something that inheres in core practices such as curriculum design and assessment. This perspective is useful for thinking about the study of

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humanities in Bengal because it legitimises treating the syllabus itself as a site where universities negotiate their obligations to different publics. The discourse of USR stresses that universities are answerable, not only to the state or to an abstract ideal of knowledge, but also to historically marginalised groups whose experiences have long been excluded from formal education. When one tracks the movement from a canon centred on Shakespeare, Milton, and the English Romantics in colonial Calcutta to syllabi that gradually make room for Tagore, for vernacular literatures under the rubric of "Indian Literature," and eventually for Dalit and feminist writing, one is witnessing a series of decisions about which publics the institution chooses to recognise and to serve.

Max Weber's reflections on the vocation of the scholar offer one way of sharpening this sense of answerability. Weber distinguishes between an "ethic of conviction" and an "ethic of responsibility," warning that

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intellectual work cannot absolve itself from the consequences it helps to produce, even when it claims value-neutrality. (Weber 101) Applied to curriculum, this distinction surfaces in the tension between appealing to disinterested aesthetic criteria and acknowledging that every selection, every construction of a canon, has consequences for who is formed as a subject, who is made visible, and who is rendered peripheral. The early Calcutta University curriculum in English can be seen as operating with an ethic of conviction that took for granted the universal value of the English canon, while sidestepping the responsibility for how such a canon would function in a stratified, colonised society. Nationalist projects at Visva-Bharati and the National Council of Education, Bengal, in contrast, attempted to act under an ethic of responsibility: they recognised that continuing to centre only English texts would help reproduce the very hierarchies they opposed and therefore sought to alter the canon in light of desired social consequences.

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Responsibility here is not just a matter of good intentions; it is mediated by the institutional logics of cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu's analyses of education and culture demonstrate how curricula and canons operate as mechanisms of social reproduction, naturalising the tastes and dispositions of dominant classes as if they were universal standards. (Bordieu 250) In colonial Bengal, proficiency in English literary culture functioned as a powerful form of cultural capital for the bhadralok, conferring access to bureaucratic employment, social prestige, and a sense of distinction vis-à-vis both the colonial rulers and the wider colonised population. When Calcutta University consecrated the English canon as the basis of literary education, it was also helping to stabilise this distribution of capital, making mastery of certain texts a condition for participation in the public sphere. To speak of responsibility in this context is to ask whether institutions merely participated in the reproduction of an unequal social order, or whether they attempted to

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redistribute cultural capital by reconfiguring what counted as legitimate knowledge.

The alternative institutions in Bengal can then be read as sites where responsibility is negotiated through struggles over cultural capital. Visva-Bharati, founded by Tagore, sought to de-centre the metropolitan canon by integrating Bengali literature, folk traditions, and comparative civilisational study into a curriculum that refused the colonial separation of “high” and “low” knowledge. The National Council of Education similarly attempted to anchor higher education in Indian languages and nationalist aspirations, rather than in the needs of the colonial bureaucracy. These were not simply symbolic acts of cultural pride; they were attempts to redirect the flow of institutional recognition toward different linguistic and social communities. Instead of treating English literary culture as the sole currency of value, these experiments tried to convert other forms of cultural capital—Bengali literary

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traditions, anti-colonial thought, non-European aesthetics—into academically recognised resources. Responsibility, in this account, lies in the institutional willingness to change what it rewards and legitimises. (Chakraborty 520-36)

Linking Weber and Bourdieu allows for a more nuanced account of responsibility than either framework offers alone. Weber emphasises that responsibility requires an orientation to the foreseeable consequences of one’s actions, which in the case of syllabus design include the shaping of students’ imaginaries and the reinforcement or contestation of social structures. Bourdieu, on the other hand, reminds us that agents act within fields whose rules and distributions of capital constrain what is thinkable and practicable. For a professor in the English department at colonial Calcutta, the range of responsible action was limited by examination systems, colonial policy, and local class aspirations; to suddenly abandon the English canon

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might have seemed both professionally and socially unviable. For reformers at Visva-Bharati or NCE Bengal, responsibility involved not only an ethical stance but also a strategic sense of how to shift the field—how to build new curricula, recruit sympathetic faculty, and persuade students and patrons that other canons mattered. Responsibility becomes a relational practice: an effort to act differently from within a structure one cannot simply step outside.

Bringing these theoretical strands back to the post-independence period, the emergence of "Indian Literature" as a curricular category can be understood as another attempt to recalibrate responsibility in conditions that were no longer overtly colonial but remained deeply unequal. Within USR discussions, there is growing emphasis on the curriculum's role in promoting social cohesion in diverse societies and in addressing internal exclusions tied to caste, gender, and region. In the Indian institutional context, the move toward "Indian

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Literature" in literature departments, including English over the years, can be understood as a response to the responsibility of representing the nation's plurality. Yet, as critics have pointed out, this move often re-inscribed hierarchies by privileging certain languages, regions, and "classical" texts over others. A Weberian ethic of responsibility would require syllabus designers to reflect on these patterned exclusions, while a Bourdieusian lens would ask how far such reforms actually redistributed symbolic capital to previously marginalised literatures.

The later inclusion of Dalit and feminist writing intensifies these questions. When Dalit autobiographies or feminist re-readings of canonical figures enter the syllabus in literature departments, the institution assumes a responsibility both to those writers and to students from historically oppressed communities who may now find their experiences named within curricular space. At the same time, it risks incorporating radical literatures into the very structures of distinction they once

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contested, turning them into examinable objects that confer cultural capital on those who can interpret them correctly. Responsibility, then, cannot be equated with inclusion alone; it must be understood as an ongoing negotiation of how inclusion is done, for whom, and with what reflexivity about its unintended effects.

The paper proceeds on the assumption that these theoretical resources—Weber's ethic of responsibility, Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital and reproduction, and the more recent USR discourse—allow one to tell a different kind of institutional history of literary studies in Bengal. Instead of narrating a linear progress from colonial to national to inclusive syllabi, the argument foregrounds the patterned ways in which different institutions construed their obligations: to empire, to nation, to language community, to subaltern groups, and to the abstract ideal of literature itself. In this reading, Calcutta University, Visva-Bharati, or NCE Bengal/Jadavpur are not simply stages in a teleology of

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decolonisation; they are competing answers to the question of what a responsible literary canon should do, and for whom. The following sections will trace these answers across time, showing how responsibility is inscribed in the everyday decisions about which texts students in English, Bengali, and other Indian language departments are asked to read, remember, and reproduce.

Changing Responsibilities: Colonial Necessities and Decolonial Motivations

The literary curriculum in colonial Bengal did not start from nothing. It built on earlier institutions that linked literature to colonial needs. Fort William College offers a key example. Lord Wellesley founded it in 1800 to train British civilians in Indian languages and customs. Indian scholars like Ram Ram Basu and Mrityunjay Vidyalankar created the first modern Bengali textbooks there. These included works like *Prabhoda Chandrika* in 1818 and adaptations of *Hitopadesha*. The college used

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these texts to teach Europeans and a growing educated elite class. This process canonized certain Indian works and framed Bengali literature as a tool for governance. In Weber's terms, responsibility lay in this choice of what to teach. The college shaped literary education to serve British goals, prioritizing utility over cultural value.

This approach grew stronger with Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Education in 1835. Macaulay rejected support for vernacular languages. He called for English education to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." (Macaulay 55) This idea shifted resources from Oriental institutions like the Calcutta Madrasa to English schools. It promoted the English literary canon as a source of moral progress. (Auckland 102) Texts by Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth became central. Responsibility became narrow and practical. The goal was to train loyal administrators, not independent thinkers. English skills

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also gave the elite access to jobs and status. This created a hierarchy where English stood above Indian languages.

Calcutta University made this system official when it received its charter in 1857. As an affiliating university, it set standards for hundreds of colleges. By 1956, it oversaw 274 institutions, including missionary colleges like St. Xavier's and government ones like Hooghly College. English honors courses focused on Homer, Shakespeare, and Scott. Exams tested memory of key passages that taught imperial values like duty and order. The Bengali department came later. Apart from classics, it included eminent figures like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Vidyasagar. But these served as supplements to English works. From Bourdieu's view, this setup reproduced social inequality. The canon gave cultural capital to a middle class. English mastery became the key to public life. Vernacular literature supported local identity but stayed secondary. The university's reach extended far, from Punjab to Ceylon

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until 1904, helping spread a uniform English-focused syllabus across the region. (Nayar)

Nationalist education in Bengal responded to this colonial model. It grew from political opposition more than planned social responsibility. The Swadeshi movement after the 1905 Bengal partition sparked demands for self-reliant learning. The National Council of Education (NCE), founded in 1906, complemented this effort. It created Bengal National College and rejected Calcutta University's exams. The curriculum emphasized Bengali, Sanskrit, and practical sciences. Although it did not completely discard western education or the study of English, its curriculum tried to maintain a balance between the Indian and western components. This especially reflected in the teaching of humanities, and most certainly in the teaching of literature. The ultimate goal was to propagate national education free from British control. This national education would not stand in exclusion from western

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education, but would dissociate itself from the colonial production of knowledge. This political choice redistributed cultural capital. It valued vernacular languages over English dominance. The NCE Bengal went through a number of transformations and finally received government affiliation as Jadavpur University in 1955.

Visva-Bharati showed its alternative approach in a humanistic way. Rabindranath Tagore started it in 1921 at Santiniketan. It grew from his 1901 Brahmacharyashram school. Tagore criticized Calcutta's exam-focused system as "cramming mills." English stayed but paired with Upanishads and Tagore's global ideas. Tagore's vision of an institute that could highlight the treasures of the East and Asia to the world found meaning in Visva-Bharati. Visva-Bharati also linked literature to rural work through Sriniketan. Politically, it opposed communal division. Humanistically, it preserved language diversity. Literature became a tool

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for harmony, not just national pride. These nationalist efforts served political goals first. Yet their humanistic focus created social responsibility effects. NCE courses reached beyond elite bhadralok students. Visva-Bharati tied literature to community needs. Bourdieu helps explain the challenge. Reformers worked within university rules but changed them. They used political support like Tagore's fame to build new programs.

Prior to 1947 and after independence in 1947, the institutions also began negotiating with the "Indian Literature", trying to understand what may constitute Indian Literature, define the term, and incorporate it in the curriculum. The Indian state promoted this category. It encouraged study across languages to build national unity. Jadavpur University started Asia's first Comparative Literature department in 1956. It used translations of Kalidasa, Kabir, Tamil Sangam poetry, and Bengali mangalkavya. Calcutta University's Bengali honors added Hindi works by Premchand and Telugu by

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GurramJashua. Visva-Bharati included Urdu and Tamil to support diversity. This reflected constitutional goals for diversity after states reorganized by language. Responsibility now meant fairness to India’s regions.

This period showed social responsibility growing. Political nationalism gave way to ethical inclusion. Universities addressed caste, gender, and regional divides. Gaps still remained. “Indian Literature” favored classical Sanskritic texts. Owing to hierarchies of languages in terms of recognition by the Indian state, many languages and literary traditions were pushed to the margins. The definition of Indian Literature and inclusion into the Indian literary canon was mediated by the complicated procedure of inclusion into the 8th schedule of the constitution and of recognition by the Sahitya Akademi, which again, in turn, was informed by electoral politics and majoritarian concerns. Dalit voices like NamdeoDhasal appeared only in the 1980s. Feminist works by Mahasweta Devi stayed limited at first.

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The Case of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University:

Jadavpur University's Department of Comparative Literature offers a prime example of Academic Social Responsibility (ASR) evolving from decolonial nationalism to subaltern inclusion. Established in 1956 as Asia's first such department, it inherited the National Council of Education's (NCE) *swadeshi* legacy from 1906. Rabindranath Tagore's 1907 "Visvasahitya" lecture at the NCE provided its intellectual seed. Tagore, in his lecture, initiated the idea of World Literature in the Indian context as had been done by Goethe earlier. Tagore talks of freeing literature from the narrow boundaries of provincialism and the practice of World Literature, relating it to his idea of universalism. It was only after the establishment of the institutional Department of Comparative Literature in 1956 that the practice of comparison in India assumed a structured but

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inclusive method. This method has incorporated changes, widened its horizon and has also moved towards an orientation that is specific to India and that seeks to explore the problematics of Indian literature. Tagore envisioned world literature as a collaborative human edifice, linking aesthetic and ethical senses beyond colonial divides. This foundation framed the curriculum as responsible to India's multilingual pluralism rather than Eurocentric canons.

Buddhadeva Bose founded the department, blending Sanskrit, Bengali, and Western classics. The 1956 syllabus balanced Greek/Latin with comparisons between *Ramayana* and *Iliad*, and Aristotle's *Poetics* alongside Bharata's *Natyasastra*. Early courses emphasized aesthetic systems and ethical imperatives across cultures, fostering creativity—three of the first five students became poets. English literature held space (Renaissance to Modernism), reflecting colonial structures, but Bose's translations of Baudelaire and

Kalidasa signaled breaking away from the English canon. He sought to break from British literature while reviving ancient traditions for modernity. Responsibility here meant nurturing non-hierarchical relations, countering Calcutta University's anglocentric focus.

The BA syllabus traced literary systems chronologically: ancient (Vedic hymns, Odyssey), medieval (Kalidasa, Dante), Renaissance (Shakespeare, Montaigne), and modern (Wordsworth, Bankimchandra). This synchronic-diachronic approach equipped students to map inter-literary flows. MA courses introduced thematology and genology, analyzing myths and genres across languages. Talking about the primary course structures of Comparative Literature in Jadavpur University, Buddhadeva Bose (9) has written:

> …the B. A. course is planned on a historical or vertical basis, and the M. A. organised on a thematic or horizontal plan. In other words, we intend to give our B.A. students

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> a solid grounding in literary history, both in India and the West, with the help of a few basic and typical texts. Exhaustive textual study of the prescribed works will not be insisted upon, but students will be made familiar with movements in ideas (e.g. the Renaissance, the Enlightenment), the rise and development of literary forms (e.g. the sonnet, the novella) and clashing or complementary concepts such as Classicism, Romanticism and Naturalism. We will know the outlines of the antiquities in Europe and India and the medieval and modern ages in Europe and Bengali literature.

The comparative approach at Jadavpur University fundamentally differed from traditional single-language literary studies by emphasizing cross-cultural dialogues and interpretive frameworks that transcended linguistic boundaries. While traditional approaches often focused on chronological literary histories within isolated

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language traditions, the comparative methodology encouraged students to examine textual relationships across cultural and temporal spaces. A closer look at the syllabi of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University would indicate the same. ManabendraBanyopadhyay, a student of the first batch of the M.A. course and a practitioner of Comparative Literature, has written:

> That day Buddhadeb spoke at length about this new subject, and he said that since it was going to be taught here, there would be a greater emphasis on Indian literature — epics would be taught, but not just Homer or Virgil; the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as well. The *Gita*, the *Upanishads*, the *Dhammapada*, and stories from the *Jataka* would also be taught. Bengali literature would be covered—from the medieval period right up to contemporary poetry and fiction. One would have to read Dante and representative works of Italian literature. From

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> German, there would be Goethe—not just *Faust*, but also *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and to read his *Divan*, attention would be given to Hafiz as well. From Romanticism to Symbolism—the intricacies of poetry. One would have to read Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy. One would have to read—Victor Hugo as well as Baudelaire and even Rimbaud. As examples of modern German literature, one would have to read Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse too. While reading Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*, attention would also be paid to the story from *Vetala Panchavimshati*. And so on, and so forth—many such things. (Bandyopadhyay 116)

Amiya Dev in his essay titled 'Comparative Literature in India' discusses an apriori location of comparative literature with regard to aspects of diversity and unity in India and talks of how defining Indian literature is both singular and plural is problematic and how in case of

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India, the study of literature should involve the notion of inter literary process and a dialectical view of literary interaction. Dev (5) writes:

> …Indian literature is not an entity but an inter literary condition in the widest possible sense of the concept… The inter literary condition of India, we should remember, reaches back much farther than its manuscript or print culture. For instance, bhakti -- a popular religious movement as both theme and social issue (stretching from the eighth to the eighteenth century) - - had a variety of textual manifestations in various Indian languages. Dev argues that the relationship between Indian commonality and differences as the primary site of comparative literature.

The 1970s marked a pivot to "Indian Literature," not for nationalism but relational necessity—texts thrive in shared histories. Syllabi integrated regional overlaps: Premchand (Hindi), Gopinath Mohanty (Odia),

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Mahasweta Devi (Bengali), alongside Sangam poetry and mangalkavya. Courses like "Comparative Modern Indian Literature" covered novels (Ashapurna Devi, Mulk Raj Anand), plays (Utpal Dutt, Vijay Tendulkar), and poems (Nirala, Agyeya). This abandoned Sanskrit-centrism, embracing multilingualism, orality, and performativity. By 2003, the syllabus reflected genology (Narrative I/II: Homer-Valmiki to Austen-Bankim), thematology (Reason/Romanticism: Rammohun Roy-Shelley), and area studies (Africa, Latin America, Bangladesh). Faculty specializations ensured interdisciplinary depth. UGC Special Assistance in the late 1990s funded East-West relations, translation workshops (inter-Indian languages keeping aside English), and Indian historiography texts. Responsibility shifted from nationalist politics to archiving material productions, elite-marginal dialogues, and print-oral histories. Weber's ethic of responsibility appeared in anticipating consequences—vernacular focus

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redistributed cultural capital, per Bourdieu, beyond bhadralok elites.

A look at the syllabus of the department would suggest that post-1990s, marginalized voices entered via cultural studies and knowledge systems. Courses like "Comparative Cultural Studies" included Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" (subaltern resistance), Ambai's stories (feminist subjectivity), and Bama's works (Dalit womanhood). "Event" courses traced Axial Era shifts (Athens-Magadha) to modern exclusions, linking Upanishads to Gandhi's Hind Swaraj. Dalit literature engaged mainstream subversion: NamdeoDhasal, Daya Pawar alongside bhakti-sufi clusters; performativity drew ethical witnesses to suffering. Feminist modules in the research courses addressed sexualities, gender politics via Mahasweta, IsmatChugtai, and Latin American testimonios (Elena Poniatowska). 2003 BA/MA syllabi featured "Literatures of Contact" (Soyinka's *Bacchae of Euripides*, adaptations of Brecht)

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and "Cross-Cultural Literary Studies" (reception of Shakespeare in Bengal). These enacted ASR ethically: responding to 1990s demands from marginalized communities, national conferences on Dalit literatures, and eventually research projects undertaken by the Centre for Translation of Indian Literatures.

Responsibility matured relationally. Early conviction (Tagore/Bose: universal humanism) yielded to consequentialism—postcolonial gaps in canon (caste/gender) prompted inclusions. Bourdieu illuminates: syllabi redistributed capital via translations, area studies (Africa-Latin America solidarity against oppression).

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